Tips for Employers on Being Disability Inclusive in Apprenticeships

An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Department of Social Protection

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Content

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Introduction

AHEAD is an independent non-profit organisation working to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities. The focus of our work is on access to and participation in further education and training, higher education and graduate employment.

AHEAD provides information to students and graduates with disabilities, teachers, guidance counsellors and parents on disability issues in education. We undertake national research relating to the inclusion of students and graduates with disabilities, contribute to national policy forums and provide professional development opportunities to develop the capacity of organisations to be more inclusive. AHEAD works with graduates and employers through the GET AHEAD Graduate Forum and the WAM Mentored Work Placement Programme.

Fastrack to Information Technology (FIT) is a representative organisation of the technology sector committed to growing Ireland's tech talent pipeline. FIT is a representative organisation of the technology sector and the national Coordinating Provider of an exciting and growing suite of technical apprenticeship programmes, which include the Software Development Associate, Computer Networking Associate and Cybersecurity Apprenticeship programmes. FIT's mission is to promote an inclusive smart economy ensuring access to in-demand tech skills for quality employment and shared prosperity. In doing so, FIT maximise opportunity through technology and make technology work for all. Its aim is to meet the recruitment needs of the tech sector, through training, support, and career opportunities for everyone regardless of their skill level so that they can achieve their true potential while contributing to the Irish economy.

'In addition to coordinating apprenticeship delivery, FIT provides training courses and work placement services with particular focus on those at risk of unemployment long-term. Every year, around 3,500 marginalised jobseeker's complete FIT courses. Over 70% of FIT graduates have proceeded

to employment or training. In addition, FIT is supporting approximately 7,000 off liners through its digital and school programmes.

In March 2021, AHEAD and FIT embarked on a 'Shared learning experience'. FIT approached AHEAD to build on previous in-house activities, exploring ways to increase access and inclusion to the workplace by enabling people with disabilities to gain a foothold in employment via a tech apprentice pathway.

This engagement's key goal was for:
— FIT to support AHEAD to better understand apprenticeship model and explore where barriers may exist for participation by people with disabilities.
— AHEAD to support FIT to identify and reduce barriers in application on onboarding processes into the forementioned tech apprenticeship programmes and explore opportunities for embedding inclusive practice.

As an outcome of this shared learning initiative, this tips booklet was developed by AHEAD to support employers engaged in apprentice onboarding activity to understand better how they can support apprentices with disabilities and disabled employees more generally.

It provides employers with an understanding of key facts about disability, highlights potential barriers to recruitment and success for disabled people, and provides clear tips to support your organisation to boost your accessibility and inclusion practices.

Facts About Disability in Ireland

Did you know?

— **22% of the Irish population are people with disabilities** (CSO) and there is positive interest in working among people with disabilities in Ireland, (DSP, 2017).

— AHEAD research shows that **when employers think about disability, they think mostly about physical disabilities** (BANDA, 2021), when in fact, the vast majority of disabled people have a non-visible disability such as dyslexia, autism, a mental health difficulty or an ongoing medical condition.

— **People with disabilities are an often-untapped talent pool**, with those of working age less than half as likely to be in employment as their non-disabled peers, (EDF, 2020). This is despite people with disabilities accessing higher levels of education in ever-increasing numbers, across all fields of study, (AHEAD, 2022; HEA, 2023; SOLAS, 2020)

— Although quality data on participation in apprenticeships by people with disabilities overall is difficult to obtain, **the number of apprentices self-declaring a disability and in receipt of supports is low**, at just 2.7% of the total number of apprentices, (DFHERIS, 2021). For context, the equivalent figure disclosing a disability and in receipt of supports in higher education is 6.6% of the student population, (AHEAD, 2022).

— A large majority of medium to large **Irish employers believe that hiring people with a disability is both a benefit to the organisation and that it can help their businesses to innovate**. In general, a significant majority of Irish employers believe that having a diverse workforce that reflects society, positively impacts their ability to generate revenue, and to motivate and retain staff, (BANDA, 2021).

— Sometimes employers may fear that the cost of providing supports for disabled employees might be prohibitive, but in fact, data from AHEAD's WAM programme shows that two thirds of accommodations put in place do not incur any cost to the employer. Most involve relatively simple changes to work practices (AHEAD, 2020), and many that do incur a cost are readily available within the organisation already (e.g., software).

— From AHEAD's experiences placing graduates with disabilities in through its placement programme, when qualified people with disabilities are supported to take up employment opportunities, 4 out of 5 either stay with the organisation post internship or have secured alternative employment, (AHEAD, 2020).

So, it's clear that Ireland has a huge untapped pool of talented people with disabilities, who are ready to work, and which big employers believe add value. Why then are we seeing such a gap between the employment rates of disabled people and the general population?

The fact is many barriers still exist to recruitment and success at work for people with disabilities.
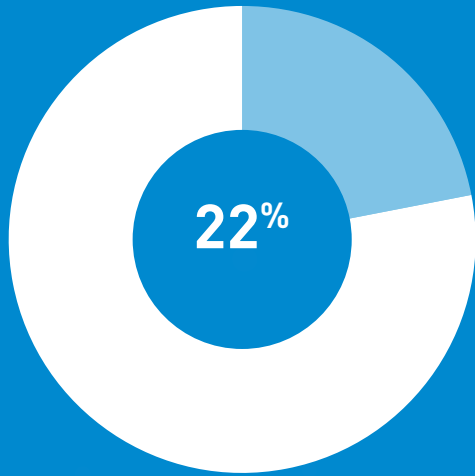
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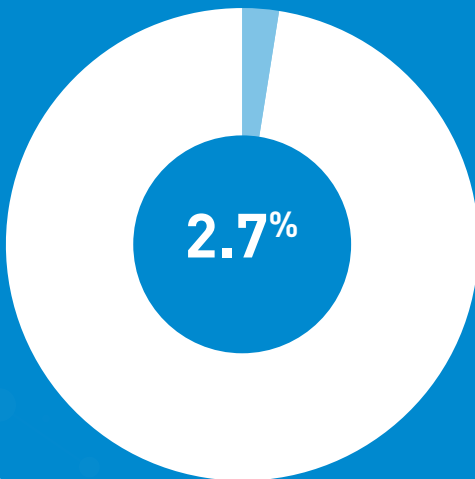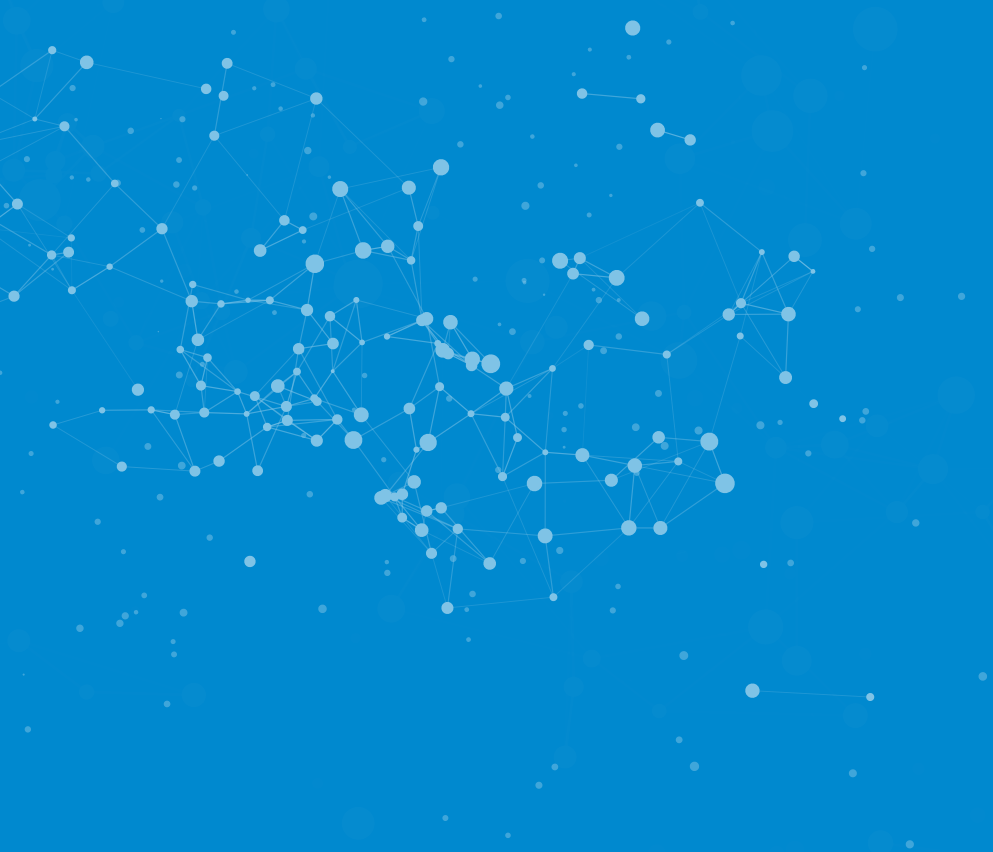
2.7% The percentage of apprentices self-declaring a disability and in receipt of supports

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Exploring the Barriers

Some of the barriers frequently cited to AHEAD include:

Attitudes in society and the workplace: Public attitudes towards disabled people in Ireland vary, and evidence suggests stigma and discrimination are prevalent. Almost half of the Irish people (46%) believe that a job applicant with a disability would be at a disadvantage and 2 in 3 people (67%) do not believe that people with disabilities have equal opportunities in terms of employment, (NDA, 2017). Examples of fears commonly raised by individuals with disabilities to AHEAD around this issue are:

— 'Will employers look beyond my disability?'
— 'Will I end up in a hostile work environment?'
— 'Will my colleagues treat me differently?'

The Disclosure Disconnect: Often people don't feel comfortable telling employers about their disability in recruitment or at work because of previous negative experiences in doing so. On the other hand, research shows that almost half (45%) of employers believe that it is a breach of trust if a person does not disclose their disability to their employer (BANDA, 2021). Greater understanding of the lived experience of people with disabilities is required to build a relationship of trust which facilitates more open communication by all parties. Examples of real fears raised by real individuals to AHEAD around disclosing include:

— 'I'm worried people won't want to employ me because I have a disability'.
— 'Will employers be willing to arrange my supports and how will they be funded?'
— 'Will disclosing affect my promotion chances?'

Barriers in the Recruitment Process: Often people with disabilities are hindered by barriers to showcasing their talents in the recruitment process. They can include:

— Inaccessible application forms and complex text-based applications.
— No opportunity to request support for interviews such as accessible venues for interview, additional clarity of the interview style and approach or sign language interpretation.
— Interview panels who are not trained on disability awareness and lack understanding of varying communication needs and styles.
— Testing processes known to disadvantage some disabled people, such as psychometric testing and group assessments.

Getting What They Need to Succeed: In some cases, even when they do disclose their disability, access to support in employment is not forthcoming. Some examples of vital supports needed by some people with disabilities include:

— Changes in how tasks are communicated, e.g., following up verbal instructions with an email reiterating the task.
— Access to assistive technologies and productivity tools, for example read aloud features, writing assistance and task management tools, often already available within mainstream software like Office 365. Sometimes, these features just have to be activated by IT departments.
— Time off to attend important medical appointments.

Awareness of the Law and Available Resources: A lack of awareness from employers about their legal responsibilities and the fantastic grants and resources available to support employers to be more inclusive.

Inaccessible Physical Spaces: People with certain disabilities may have certain physical access requirements such as ramps to entrances, lifts between floors, accessible bathrooms, uncluttered walkways, and access to a disabled parking space.

Inaccessible Digital Spaces and Materials: Digital systems and platforms which have not been designed to adhere to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) may cause difficulties for some disabled users in interacting effectively with them. Equally, if authors of documents and other digital materials have not taken the easy steps to make them accessible, they may not be usable by some disabled people.

But here is the good news! There are lots of easy to implement steps you can take to reduce these barriers and make your organisation more disability friendly.

If you want to get the most from your employees, then creating an environment where they feel valued for who they are is vital.

Top Tips on Being an Inclusive Employer

01 Review Your Recruitment Process:

Most of the barriers experienced by people with disabilities in recruitment are a result of a lack of awareness or unconscious bias, rather than from an intentional act of discrimination. So, it's worth taking time to thoughtfully review where barriers may exist in your recruitment process, and ensure staff involved have the disability awareness training they need to get the most from interviewing a diverse pool of talent.

As part of this work, you should:

1. **Review your job specifications** to ensure the language is written in disability friendly plain English, and not unintentionally discouraging applications from disabled people. For example, when you say you want an 'energetic' candidate, what do you mean? Because that may well discourage applications from individuals with a physical disability.

2. **Accessibility audit your website and application forms**, to ensure they adhere to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), meaning all individuals regardless of disability can engage with the process. External services can help you with this if you need it.

3. **Provide clear opportunities for disclosure** of disability at all stages of the process. It's useful to give a general statement in your communication on your commitment to offering equal opportunities, and to clearly highlight that candidates with disabilities may request accommodations to support them to engage with all aspects of the recruitment process into employment. It's also useful to highlight that information will only be shared on a need-to-know basis with those in the process.

4. **Offer flexibility in the recruitment process.** It's important to be aware that there are many ways that people can demonstrate their skills and suitability for a role. Some testing methods such as psychometric tests or group assessments are a barrier for people with certain disabilities, and it's important that you are ready to offer different assessment strategies in these instances to give everybody a fair chance. Your goal here is to maintain the robustness of the process, but lower barriers for individuals to be at their best within it.

5. **Be accessibility aware when selecting a venue.** Always ensure that the venue you are hosting interviews or other recruitment processes in, is wheelchair accessible, close to an accessible bathroom, and in a building with easy access to accessible parking bays. It's useful to communicate this information as part of general communication about the process so people don't have to ask. Attaching a picture of the interview space is also a great way to reduce anxiety and support people to get prepared.

02 Build an Inclusive Culture

It's important to ensure your workplace and work practices create an environment where people with disabilities can feel comfortable being themselves and telling others about their disability if they wish. If you want to get the most from your employees, then creating an environment where they feel valued for who they are is vital.

So, what needs to happen?

1. **Give signals and signposts that inclusion is the norm in your company.** It's important to send the message that people with disabilities are part of the fabric of the organisation. Small steps like always hosting events in accessible spaces, turning captions on in company webinars and videos as standard, and using stock imagery featuring diverse range of employees across your communications all give employees small signals that you are serious about inclusion.

2. **Develop structures for peer support.** It is useful to encourage and support the development of a staff network or Employee Resource Group (ERG) focussed on disability. This enables community building and meaningful reflection about accessibility and inclusion in your organisation. Create avenues for these networks to raise accessibility issues arising from the group discussions to senior management – a great way to enhance company development.

3. **Celebrate Diversity.** When people feel it's okay to be different, then they bring more of themselves to work. A fantastic way to show that your organisation welcomes all kinds of difference is to host visible celebrations of diversity, such as recognising International Day of People with Disabilities, or disability pride.

4. **Provide disability awareness and basic digital accessibility training for all staff.** By ensuring all staff have a basic level of training in these areas, you will support the building of a culture where different ways of working and communicating are respected and embedded. Disability Awareness Training is particularly important for staff involved in recruitment.

03 Providing a Platform for Success

You want your employees to perform to their best, right? So, it's important to provide them with the tools and supports they need to succeed. For people with disabilities, this means listening to their needs and responding, often by making small changes that make all the difference in their work.

To ensure this happens, you should:

1. **Offer clear information about staff supports**, including how to avail of disability supports. Consider having a dedicated company webpage or space on your staff portal outlining your commitment to ensuring your workplace is disability friendly. Communicate your organisations openness to providing a range of individualised supports. Provide information on how to access them and a named contact to discuss needs in confidence.

2. **Respond to individual needs.** Once an employee has informed you that they have a disability, it's important to engage in open dialog with them to discover what, if any support needs they may have. This process is known as a Needs Assessment. It's a structured conversation which explores the impact of the disability, in relation to the workplace environment and the demands of the role. Through this dialog, appropriate supports are explored and agreed with the employee and the outcomes are documented and signed off by both employer and employee. The process should include information on who is responsible for implementing the agreed support (e.g., HR dept, line manager etc.) and information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis with employee consent.

3. **Develop Inclusive Policies, Procedures and Strategies.** It's important to have clear policies and procedures around the provision of reasonable accommodations (the legal term for disability supports) and the needs assessment outlined above. It's also useful to consider where accessibility and inclusion can be embedded in other company policies, for example those concerning procurement, communications, and recruitment. Many larger companies are now also taking the step of developing specific Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategies.

4. **Be aware of resources and financial supports available.** There are a range of organisations, like AHEAD, which provide a variety of resources and supports to help you on your journey to becoming a more inclusive employer. Additionally, a range of state grants and supports are available to help cover the cost of supporting somebody with a disability in recruitment and employment, providing awareness training to staff, and adapting your workplace.

5. **Consider Introducing a Mentoring Programme.** A terrific way to support new employees to settle in your organisation, navigate how the culture operates, and develop networks within the organisation, is to operate a mentoring system for new staff. It's simple. Pair new staff members up with another volunteer employee outside their direct team, whose role it is to meet them occasionally, introduce them to how things work, and act as a confidential sounding-board for any early issues arising. This is a great approach for all new staff, but particularly helpful for people with disabilities who may find it more challenging to adapt quickly to new environments.

Small Steps Lead to Big Change!

It may seem after reading this resource that there's a lot to get your head around, but implementing even one of the tips in this resource is a positive step in the right direction. Remember that:

1. Negative attitudes are frequently cited as the biggest barrier for the inclusion of people with disabilities, so your positive attitude of openness to difference, and readiness to be flexible and supportive, is a great first step.

2. Around two thirds of supports that people with disabilities need to succeed, do not incur any cost to the employer. Many are readily available within the organisation and most involve relatively simple changes to work practices, (AHEAD, 2020). Grants are available to pay for those that do incur a cost.

3. Creating an inclusive workplace is great business! It means you get ahead of your competitors by tapping into new talent and unlocking the potential of all employees. And guess what – having a diverse workforce makes your organisation a fun and interesting place to work too.

Oh and by the way…

By implementing all these tips, you are helping to meet your legal obligations under the Equal Status Acts and the Employment Equality Acts not to discriminate against disabled people, and to provide them with supports (known as reasonable accommodations in law) to engage in employment on an equal basis with others. It's a win-win situation for employer and employee.

Implementing these tips is a win-win situation for employer and employee.

Further Resources from AHEAD

— Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) is a work placement programme coordinated by AHEAD which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace.

— WAMs Top 5 Tips for Recruiting Graduates with Disabilities Video offers employers easy to implement practices to remove barriers in your recruitment process.

— Recruiting and/or working online? This page on Inclusive virtual recruitment and onboarding practices will help raise your awareness of the accessibility features of online video-conferencing platforms.

— Not sure where to start when you want to include graduates with disabilities in your workplace? Look no further than our publication which highlights how to start your diversity journey, including employee resource groups and sharing the experience of WAM managers and mentors on the programme.

— This handy guide to inclusive recruitment looks at job specification, language, disclosure and testing.

— Interested in finding out more about our organisations? Visit the AHEAD website or FIT website for more information.

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